



SOCIAL MEDIA AND FRANCHISE CRICKET: GLOCALIZATION AND TEAM IDENTIFICATION

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ABSTRACT

The last two decades have seen a colossal development in how sport is consumed. Interestingly, there has also been an evolution in how sports organizations, teams, athletes and fans communicate. As a result, the very formulation of fan-team relationships has seen a huge change in its dynamics. The potential of social media to move their business forward in a dynamic and fast-paced environment has been realized by brands and organizations. When it comes to sports, fans today are eager to experience the event first-hand, rather than passively watch it. Strategic content management plays a crucial role now as fans are looking for a variety of content to augment their direct engagement. Initially, information was perceived as something to withhold in order to prevent negative perceptions but sports marketers have now realized the value of being both gatekeepers and producers of their own content in order to build long-term brand loyalty. How social media platforms like Twitter are being utilized by professional sports teams to engage fans around the globe has become a topic for discussion. Further, the execution of this strategy has found its place in twenty-first century cricket too. Since its inception, the Indian Premier League has become the cause of several controversies and debates and as a result, is often seen in a bad light. The commercialization of the sport has been especially looked down upon by traditionalists and purists. However, its contribution to modern cricket is immense and often downplayed. The positioning of this near-global 'India ka Tyohaar' has brought several themes to the forefront. While its impact has been widely documented from a business point of view, there is a lot of scope for viewing it from a psycho-sociological point of view. This research is an attempt in that direction.

KEYWORDS: Indian Premier League, Cricket, Social Media, Glocalization, Team Identification, Sports Communication, Sport Psychology.

INTRODUCTION:

Through the years, we have seen social media transition into becoming a space that goes beyond a networking tool for interpersonal relationships among family and friends into one that includes brands and corporate organisations. Their use of social media now adopts a more sophisticated approach that not only aims to push a product to sale but also to establish a relationship with its consumers. As the potential of social media's personalized nature, interactive and immersive abilities is being realised, it has found its way into strategic communication among practitioners. Among these practitioners are sports brands that are using the abilities of social media to form a stronger presence that includes garnering consumer attention, maintaining communication with them and increasing brand awareness. Social media has revolutionized the sport-viewing experience in a way like never before. Keeping up with matches and stats in real time, interacting with other fans, and getting a behind-the-scenes look at the teams. Watkins (2019) believes that social media provides sport fans with insider access to their favourite teams and the opportunity to interact with their favorite athletes that was previously only possible through chance encounters at games.

Another astounding transition that was being carried out simultaneously was the one in the sporting world, that of the IPL (Indian Premier League). For a rather puritan cricket-loving audience to embrace what was once perceived as a gimmick to becoming an important aspect of modern cricket, the league also underwent a revolution. This paradigm shift can also be understood through how the tournament made for an excellent marketing tool in itself. In 2007, the BCCI (Board of Control for Cricket in India) announced the launch of the IPL two days after the first edition of the T20 World Cup in South Africa and India's subsequent victory. For the first time in cricket history, there would be privately owned teams. As a result, there were at least three owners from the Hindi film industry, who combined the passion for cricket and the glitz of Bollywood. The then league convener, Lalit Modi, established this potential for IPL to become a marketable brand with his vision. He declared, 'Cricket in India is a \$2 billion-a-year market. We are sitting on a gold mine. Our players should be paid at par with international footballers and NBA stars, in millions of dollars and not measly rupees.' Wigmore and Wilde (2019) believe that the BCCI had made almost £1 billion even before a ball had been bowled in the IPL, making it one of the most audacious openings of sporting leagues in history.

IPL, combines cricket without conservatism and time-investment, celebrities, and huge amounts of money that has not only radicalized cricket, but also changed its economics. Cut to twelve years later, social media is now an embedded arm for sports teams across the world, especially the IPL franchises, with the kind of access no external source is privy to. COVID-19 prompted brands and organizations across the globe to customize their marketing and communications approaches. During this decades-long evolution, IPL teams have adopted social media strategies and new ways to keep fans engaged and find new ways of storytelling. Teams are now growing comfortable with the absence of traditional media and instead are focusing on increasing their social media presence and taking their audiences to places and moments never seen before.

Twitter, over the years, has formed an informal forum of dedicated cricket-viewing fans that identify themselves as members of "Cricket Twitter." This focus group is made up of a diverse demographic base with varied loyalties, preferences and perceptions and is worthy of observation. Moreover, the prevalent use of Twitter in sports and its impact on the sport industry makes it an ideal context for studying how social media can be used to enhance the fan-team relationship, the team perception and the viewing experience.

METHODOLOGY:

The aim of this study is to carry out qualitative research about sports communication with reference to cricket and specifically the Indian Premier League with a psycho-sociological take on consumer culture. It seeks to explore themes like glocalization, team identification in order to maximize brand loyalty through the medium of Twitter.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

1. What are the parameters on which franchise cricket builds team loyalty on social media?
2. What kind of social media strategies do they use for marketing and branding?
3. Why is social media activation important for brand loyalty?

HYPOTHESIS:

Identifying with a specific region, its culture and player(s) is increasingly becoming the social media strategy adopted by IPL franchises to establish effective brand loyalty.

OBJECTIVES:

1. To observe how Twitter influences fan-team relationships
2. To examine the role of social media in team identification and branding
3. To explore the role regionalism plays in the team's social media strategy
4. To understand how certain players are used to form a connection in franchise cricket

METHOD:

Much like the studies involving NBA and NFL, the study will employ a qualitative approach and use a combination of two methods to thematically analyse the content in the social media strategies used by three IPL franchises, namely Chennai Super Kings, Mumbai Indians, and Royal Challengers Bangalore. However, content analysis was their focus, while this study used the combination of netnography, discourse analysis and key informant interview.

2.1 Netnography with participant observation:

The results of this study were derived from the qualitative method called netnography with participant observation. Because this method is not intrusive and in fact, natural and discreet, it'll enable the study to access in-depth insights, capture and assess actions as they happen, delivering a more honest and instant picture. When it comes to the role the researcher plays in this study, there is a spectrum of observation techniques to opt for - between covert and overt observation and an observer who participates completely in an activity and one who is purely a fly on the wall. The role chosen depends upon the subject being researched. Here, it makes sense to adopt the participant as observer approach. Moreover, this method was followed because participating on Cricket Twitter for over five years formed the basis of the exploratory research that became the foundation of the research questions and hypothesis of this study.

This research opens up the possibility of exploring Twitter's potential as a research tool. Specific hashtag searches on Twitter can have tremendous research applications especially in social and behavioural sciences. Its Advanced Search option allows seeing both what topics are reverberating with the public as well as what Twitter users are actually saying about the given topic. In a nutshell, it provides the ability to track both the subjects and the content of the subject through this tool. Advanced Search allows you to combine two or more terms (keywords/hashtags/Twitter accounts) to present extremely specific results.

2.2 Critical Discourse Analysis:

Here, discourse analysis majorly covered the communication the team handed out to its fans. Discourse analysis was aimed at analyzing social media communication that facilitates team identification and branding. To understand the effect of the content strategies implemented by professional sports teams on Twitter, an analysis of a team's communication to their fans through their social media content, likes, retweets, fans' tweets, and discussions was carried out in the stipulated time period.

Much of the literature surrounding Twitter is from the lens of either a patron outreach tool or as a way to collect patron feedback (Ovadia, 2009). In order to maximise the value out of the Twitter search, the study was divided into precise search algorithms. Tweets that use the above-mentioned hashtags qualified as the data that is analyzed as the team's communication to their fans. Further, tweets with the above-mentioned hashtags that particularly talk about their top players or the city the franchise is based in were studied. How fans interact with the tweet, if it is taken positively or not, what the general sentiment about the tweet in the replies is, the words and language used by both the team and its fans in the tweet. The method is aimed at thematically analyzing the language, tone, personalization, conversation, etc. used around the mentioned variables in their tweets. Apart from seeing how they use creating a connection with the player(s) as a strategy, it also sought to establish how much a role the local lingo plays in social media branding by the teams.

Variables:

- Use of words like Thala, Chinna Thala, SuperDen, Yellove, etc., vocabulary from Tamizh culture in which context, for CSK
- Maharashtrian lingo, information about players, ground, etc., for Mumbai Indians
- Use of words like King Kohli, Mr. 360, Ee Sala Cup Namde, "Namma" Bengaluru etc.

Sampling and Tools in Data Collection:

The study considered the communication of four teams, to narrow down its scope, thus uses the purposive sampling method. To filter out the best subjects for the study, the most successful teams on Twitter are chosen. Their social media success can be gauged by the number of followers they have, over the years. Thus, the most followed teams are:

Table 2.1: The most followed IPL teams on Twitter

Chennai Super Kings	6.6M
Mumbai Indians	6.3M
Royal Challengers Bangalore	4.3M

**(as of March 31, 2021; Source: Twitter)*

Purposive sampling is used even when filtering out tweets to study in this research. Since each franchise has a dedicated and distinct hashtag associated with it based on their team motto, the study is considered only those tweets. Below are the identified hashtags for each franchise that are being used by their respective social media teams for the fourteenth edition of the league.

Table 2.2: Identified hashtags for CSK, MI and RCB for sampling

Chennai Super Kings	#WhistlePodu #Yellove
Mumbai Indians	#MumbaiIndians #OneFamily
Royal Challengers Bangalore	#PlayBold #WeAreChallengers

In this study, the researcher, aims to get the picture of our study population, which is "Cricket Twitter", a community within Twitter dedicated to all things cricket. It consists of a variety of memes, trolling, analysis, articles, writing, podcasts, and campaigns. Twitter use is prevalent in sports, with anyone from athletes to coaches to sports journalists using the site as a platform to provide fans with immediate access to information (Watkins, 2019). The stipulated time period for observation began from 9th April 2021, on the inaugural day of the fourteenth edition of the Indian Premier League till 4th June 2021, lasting for 8 weeks. Due to the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in India, the tournament was paused mid-way and postponed till September. The last match before the schedule was changed was played on 2nd May, 2020. As a result, all Twitter communication during the first four weeks was considered "on season" while the communication carried out by the teams in the last four weeks was considered "off-season."

Table 2.3: The observation period categorised on the basis of on-season and off-season

	Since	Until
Week 1	9th April	16th April
Week 2	17th April	23rd April
Week 3	24th April	30th April
Week 4	1st May	7th May
Week 5	8th May	14th May
Week 6	15th May	21st May
Week 7	22nd May	28th May
Week 8	29th May	4th June

In the case of each franchise, the study considered tweets that not only mention the city, its culture and home ground but their most capped players still playing in the fourteenth edition. The player should have played a minimum of 95 matches to be considered in the list.

Table 2.4: Most capped players of Chennai Super Kings, Mumbai Indians and Royal Challengers Bangalore

Team	Home ground	Most capped players
Chennai Super Kings	MA Chidambaram Stadium, Chennai	MS Dhoni (174) Suresh Raina (164) Ravindra Jadeja (116)
Mumbai Indians	Wankhede Stadium, Mumbai	Rohit Sharma (155) Kieron Pollard (164) Jasprit Bumrah (95)
Royal Challengers Bangalore	M. Chinnaswamy Stadium, Bengaluru	Virat Kohli (192) AB de Villiers (141) Yuzvendra Chahal (98)

**(as of March 31, 2021; Source: HoldingWilley)*

Variables:

In the two most retweeted tweets weekly, throughout the tournament must include the given hashtags and have content about the identified players, cities - Chennai, Mumbai, Bengaluru, their home grounds or their native language to qualify as samples.

Twitter Algorithm for Advanced Twitter Search:

The research identified the Advanced Twitter Search algorithm for the purpose of data collection. It was along the following lines: For instance, during Week 1 (9th April - 16th April 2021), the search algorithm for Chennai Super Kings was: (#Whistlepodu OR #Yellove) (from:ChennaiIPL) until:2021-04-16 since:2021-04-09

The hashtags, franchise handle and time period of the search can be used interchangeably. So similarly, during Week 2 (17th April - 23rd April), the search algorithm for Royal Challengers Bangalore was: (#PlayBold OR #WeAreChallengers) (from:RCBTweets) until:2021-04-23 since:2021-04-16

2.3 Key Informant Interview:

Another method incorporated in the study is a key informant interview. Ideally, this approach is useful as an isolated research technique and also in conjunction with other qualitative methods (Marshall, 1996). The latter process is followed in this study.

The researcher interviewed Mr. Gurkirat Singh Gill, who worked on Delhi Capital's social media and rebranding strategy.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

A country's affiliation with its cricket team is closely associated with its perception of patriotism, national and social identity. For instance, Appadurai (1996) observes that India's modern nationalist discourses have been deeply interwoven with the game. However, in franchise cricket, the nationalist focus is replaced by

carefully constructed regionalism. IPL fans are therefore loyal to their IPL teams on the basis of specific cities and regions in India, and not on the basis of national identity (Khondker, 2018).

IPL teams based out of the capitals of big states and metropolitan cities with traditional cricket centres such as Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai have subsequently bigger home markets as compared to Punjab and Rajasthan. In a nutshell, the size of the home market is determined by the location of the franchise. Astill (2013) believes that the big cities attract local followings more quickly, but the loyalties of most IPL viewers still remain fungible.

Earlier, national cricket boards were lobbying to limit their national players' involvement in the increasingly lucrative franchise-based tournaments. For several players, the franchise-based contracts are worth more than national contracts, at least monetarily.

In the last two decades, there was a change not only in the way cricket was viewed and modelled but also a change in the very formulation of fan-team relationships. According to Watkins (2019) and Senkbeil (2016), the social psychology of sports fandom and sports enthusiasts who choose to come together in small self-selected collectives to amplify their emotional attachment to that sport and team, has been a subject for sociologists and anthropologists for many years now. However, by courtesy of social media, we are seeing the development of studies that have added a new dimension due to the emergence of the "proactive fan."

Senkbeil (2016) and Ennis (2020) insist on taking a look at media communication in sports in order to understand how the dynamics have now changed. The most passionate fans have become the ideal targets of consumer culture for multiple reasons. Firstly, advertising has wooed and flattered them. Secondly, TV producers have welcomed them as 'intense background noise' for sports broadcasts. Thirdly, their loyalty has earned praise from cultural theorists and critics. Lastly, because big businesses were forced to acknowledge their power as customers and consumers, they are coming up with ways to pursue them. When fans are categorized and treated as consumers, it is likely that they are becoming more demanding about the product. Today's fans want to experience the event first-hand, rather than passively watch it. Whether following the sport live or virtually, strategic content management plays a crucial role now as fans are looking for video, multiple angle clips, and picture-in-picture content to augment their direct engagement.

Holmes and Sundaresan (2020) explain that in the case of cricket, the COVID-19 situation has catalyzed a trend that has been in play for thirty years, transitioning both the media source and the medium used to deliver game information to cricket fans. Initially, information was perceived as something to withhold in order to prevent negative perceptions. However, teams have realized the value of being both gatekeepers and producers of their own content in the past decade and a half.

3.1 The relationship between franchise cricket and brand loyalty:

In sports, loyalty can be determined by the positive behaviours and attitudes towards the team that are a result of the degree of psychological attachment towards it. In the upcoming chapters, the study will explore the psychological process through which a fan moves to the level of a highly identified fan through the Psychological Continuum Model developed by Funk and James. (Refer to Fig.3.1) The perspectives, attitudes, and behavior of highly identified fans are more likely to accept relatively poor performances and failures as compared to those without the same level of commitment.

Scholars such as Ennis (2020) and Eagleman (2013) also emphasize upon the huge role emotions play in influencing the behavioural intentions of the fans.

Although fans have been classified as consumers by several market research studies over time, they are still distinct from each other due to certain characters that arise due to the very nature of sports. Samra and Wos (2004) ascertain that there indeed remains a demarcation between a fan and a consumer because "fans are loyal consumers who tend to exhibit a variety of loyalty behaviors" which is reflected in their willingness to stay in the relationship. Despite sport's commercialization, many fans never become consumers.

It is evident in the existing literature that achieving the level of loyalty that separates a fan from fitting into the typical consumer trope, sports marketers and team strategists must design their messaging to keep up with their expectations and the changing landscape of sports communication. In the absence of nationalist discourse in a global spectacle, there needs to be a connection and experience so rewarding for the fan that they are compelled to give the brand this kind of loyalty. This study of IPL franchises' social media strategies examines two aspects that may potentially be used to contribute to building their brand and ensuring long-term loyalty.

3.1.1 Glocalization in Sports:

Understanding the factors through which franchises build their brand is crucial to theorizing and contextualizing this study. It examines glocalization as one of those parameters. The highly influential social scientific theory of glocalization

is a synthesis of globalization and localization. Coined by Roland Robertson (1992) and Robert Swyngedouw (1997), Robertson articulated the keyword glocalization after consolidating his theoretical arguments about globalization. Robertson (1995) explains glocalization as the harmonization between homogenization and heterogenization, standardization and adaptation, convergence and divergence, universals and particulars. His explanation moved away from seeing globalization through the lens of the prevalent, grossly simplified definition of globalization as an essentially recent economic development. As an alternative, Robertson (1992) proposed the following:

"Its central dynamic involves the two-fold processes of the particularization of the universal and the universalization of the particular."

Subsequently, according to Robertson (2014), the counter narrative known as glocalization arose in response to the criticisms surrounding globalization in the mid-1990s. The major criticism was that globalization would result in homogenization and standardization. Since then, it has had to encounter "motifs of polyethnicity, cosmopolitanism, interculturality, synchronicity, hybridity, transculturality; indigenization; veneralization; diasporization, and yet others." Further, he adds that glocalization is micromarketing wherein the goods and services on a global or near-global basis are tailored and advertised to an increasingly differentiated local and particular market.

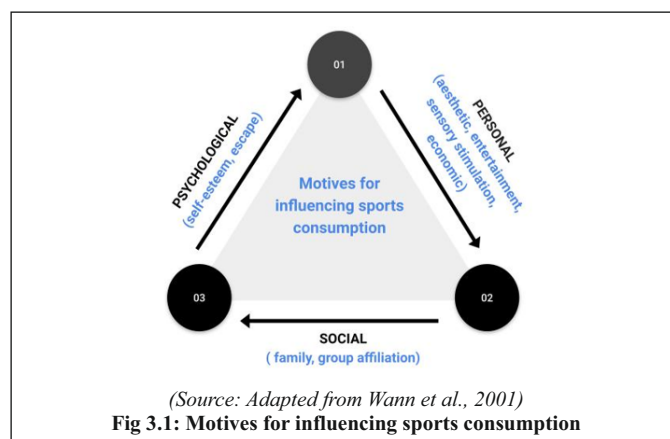
Khondker (2018) believes that a similar process is evident in the presentation of the IPL, wherein a near-universal or a global game is repackaged through a variety of innovations to make it attractive to both local and international consumers. Cricket has been commercialized as has every major competitive sport, and the IPL comes as a game- Glocalization makes it possible to create a spectacle like the IPL that is not only incorporated with Indian money, but also with Indian motifs and meanings, primarily for consumption purposes. In addition, the tournament also creates a glocal space in which cosmopolitanism and new forms of local and regional identity can blend. These cricket pitches and stadiums immediately turn into glocal spaces, he concludes. In addition to changing cricket culture, the IPL has also changed views on entertainment sports. As a result, a lot of talent from around the world can now be found here while still retaining its local, national, and regional characteristics.

Although studies on the relationship between sports, globalization and glocalization are scarce, there is some literature in sport sociology that explores the links between globalized American sports and local responses to them with this conception of sport glocalization. As an example, Cho (2009) uses the lens of glocalization to understand how the expansion of US sports in South Korea since the late 1990s influences the de-/reconstruction of the 'national' among local sports fans. Huang (2013) explores the NBA's diffusion in China, in which the reach of globalizing American basketball commodities and their response to it, is examined. This study also aims to discuss how Chinese basketball has reinvented tradition and reconstructed modernity. Due to this type of consumer culture and commercialization, international players perform together for 'local' teams for local, national, and global audiences.

3.1.2 - Understanding Team Identification:

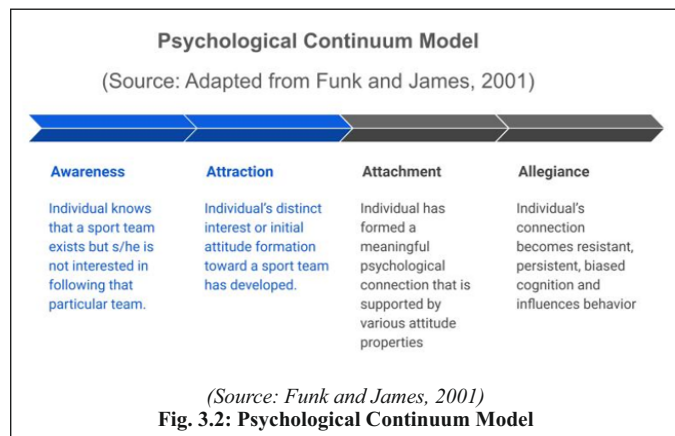
Another concept that this study will look at to ensure brand loyalty within sports is that of team identification. The feeling of emotional attachment a sports fan has to his or her team of choice is team identification. It creates and fosters brand salience by building fan familiarity with the team and its attributes. It is often linked to associations, commitments, and emotional connections. (Kim & Kim, 2009; Wann et al., 2001).

According to existing research (Wann et al., 2001; James and Ross, 2002; Smith and Stewart, 2007), a fan's involvement in a sport is the result of a complex interaction of factors. Most of these studies are carried out on North American fans, so they cannot be generalized across cultures, but they provide a better understanding of the multi-dimensional aspects that influence why people consume sports. The scale developed by Wann et al (2001) appears to be the most holistic. It looks at three distinct areas - personal, social and psychological. See Fig. 3.1.



The concept can further be built upon with Nair's (2011) findings wherein she ties down the potential benefits of identification for individuals. By aligning their fate with that of the team they support, identification provides increased self-esteem, transcendence, a sense of belongingness, and a sense of collectivity with the use of common apparel or other symbols of allegiance.

In addition to that, a framework called Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) developed by Funk and James (2001), further expands categories based on the level of engagement with their sports team. The continuum involves four stages: awareness, attraction, attachment and allegiance. The level of identification increases as a fan progresses to allegiance. (Refer to Fig 3.2)



Watkins (2019) attributes the PCM as a basis to better understand the process through which a sport spectator moves towards becoming a fan through psychological connections. In this case, the role of social media such as Twitter is to allow them to publicly identify with the team.

Building upon multiple themes from the existing literature and analyses, this study will look at how effective social media strategies are if they are centred around the concept of glocalization and maximizing team identification. It will also explore whether the teams selected for the purpose of this study namely Chennai Super Kings, Mumbai Indians and Royal Challengers Bangalore employ it on mediums such as Twitter, the discourse and opinions around it and if they result in the kind of brand loyalty the abovementioned scholars have foregrounded.

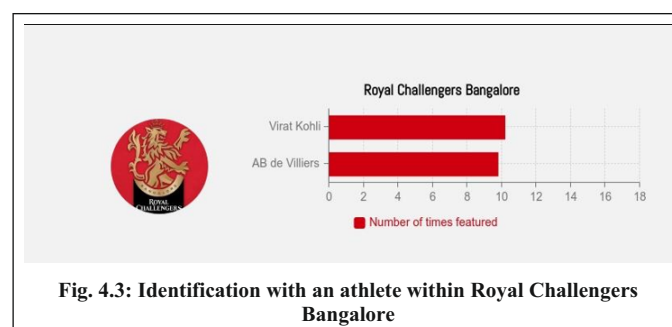
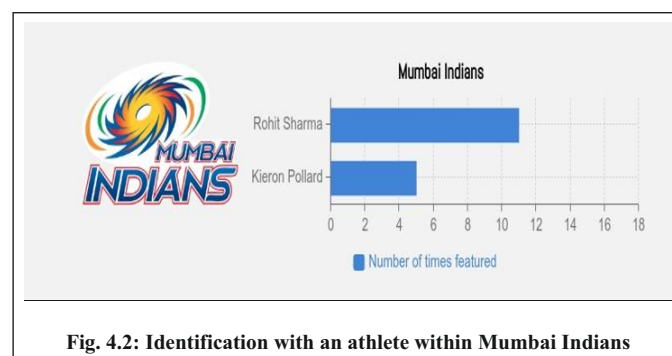
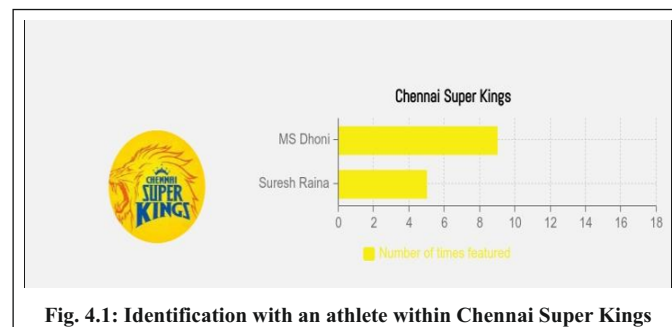
DATA ANALYSIS:

The qualitative nature of this study explored the possibility of being introduced to several new themes. For instance, during the netnography, the researchers developed an insight into how important it is for a fan to identify with the players of the teams he supports in order to be categorized as a highly identified fan of the team itself. The most capped players as identified in the research earlier (See Fig. 2.4) can be called the team's marquee or icon players. These players have a high base price because of their exceptional skill set as well as popularity. Within cricket, they hold a celebrity status and are superstars. Now, the perfect amalgamation of a superstar taking to a culture and a culture treating him like the son of soil is illustrated in the case of Mahendra Singh Dhoni. Sundaresan, in his book *The Dhoni Touch: Unravelling the Enigma That is Mahendra Singh Dhoni* (2019) state:

"The word Thala is simply Tamil for head. In Chennai, it's a title. It's not to be confused with Thalaiva, which is, of course, Rajinikanth. It is not used lightly, unlike Thala, which is a far more relatable term. Perhaps, it's got to do with the man who holds the title."

He concurs that 'Thala' is a perfect fit for Chennai's latest superstar, MS Dhoni. More so because of the fact that he is CSK captain. Dhoni's roots are from Ranchi but he has led the Chepauk-based franchise like his own and it is safe to say that the franchise has built their presence, brand and fanbase around him. This can be inferred from the ad campaigns, ambassadorship, media presence and most importantly, CSK's social media strategy. Although based on the same premise, but largely varying in magnitude, the same can be said about Virat Kohli and AB de Villiers and their relationship with Bengaluru. Although the Kannada-speaking crowd has often criticized RCB's posturing to cater to the non-native fan base by minimizing the use of the local language in their anthems or even in terms of scouting and acquiring talent that is not from Bengaluru or Karnataka, Bengaluru has treated these two superstars as their own. As per the observations during the netnography, it is safe to say that Mumbai Indians' following is not dependent on the popularity of Rohit Sharma or Kieron Pollard. In fact, it is the only team that holds that kind of privilege. There remain a lot of loyalists who have stayed connected with the team because players like Sachin Tendulkar, Lasith Malinga and Mahela Jayawardene and as of 2021, there surely are loyalists of players like Rohit Sharma and Kieron Pollard that form chunks of the fanbase but it is one team that is liked especially because of the kind of cricket they have played in the tournament.

Watkins (2019) observed that sport fans frequently develop an emotional attachment towards favorite players that can transcend identification and loyalty to the team. These three teams, in particular, seem to realise the importance of doing so and have intently worked on providing fans with the opportunity of connecting with them and learning more about them. Previous studies in this regard (Hambrick et al., 2010) indicate that when teams focus on increasing access to these players, the identification towards the teams grows stronger too. Off the field, the three franchises have heavily leveraged the celebrity status of their star players and its most capped players to form bonds, build relationships, for ambassadorship, team promotional appearances as well as their social media strategies. From the sample size of the tweets collected for the purpose of discourse analysis, it can be understood that (Fig 4.1, 4.2, 4.3) show the number of times the most capped players of each team featured in the most retweeted tweets from the sample size.



Highlighting the awards and achievement of players is another strategy teams employ to emphasize athletes as elite. Teams focus on player records, milestones and accomplishments to celebrate this by highlighting player accomplishments on the field, throughout the season (Watkins, 2019). Moreover, for professional sports teams, where athletes are celebrities and brands in their own right, getting the players involved with the social media strategy is one way that sports teams can boost fan interaction with the team.

For instance, during Week 7 that was in the off-season, Chennai Super Kings' most retweeted tweets as seen in Fig. 4.4 and Fig. 4.5 were both about the 2018 season victory. Apart from that, in the sample size, a nostalgic throwback tweet comes up at least two more times.



Fig. 4.4: [@ChennaiIPL] (2021, May 27) “Sketched in memories forever! Reminiscing the historic comeback of our [lions].”



Fig. 4.5: [@ChennaiIPL] (2021, May 15) “Jos Bhai to Mahi Bhai: That twirl made our hearts swirl.”

Mumbai Indians throughout the observation period posted throwback pictures on at least four instances. As mentioned in Fig. 4.6, 4.7, 4.8, MI also indulged in teasing the fans for the continuation of the 2021 season in UAE with a reminder of their season victory when the IPL was played in the same country in 2020.



Fig 4.6: [@mipaltan] (2021, May 25)

Never. Give. Up.

7 years ago. Ball sailed over the boundary. Tare sprinted towards the North Stand & The Wankhede went bonkers!”



Fig 4.7: [@mipaltan] (2021, May 12)

“#OnThisDay, 2 years ago, a thrilling 1-run victory helped us win our fourth IPL trophy.

We recall our spectacular win in an epic #MIvCSK Grand Finale.”



Similarly, RCB also stayed true to this #OnThisDay strategy by highlighting their past performances and player milestones specific to Kohli and de Villiers with throwback pictures. It was observed that fans respond positively to these milestones as the major chunk of the RCB fanbase consists of loyalists of its two star players whose performances are most highlighted.



4.1 Globalisation among the most followed teams on Twitter: Overt or Subtle:

One of the main themes in this study was the concept of globalisation and how franchises make use of local motifs and symbols in a globalised space. Apart from looking at the use of these global symbols and motifs within tweets, it also views the language and elements of the culture used and fans' response to it. For instance, CSK started their social media campaign during the season by catering to their fandom's emotional investment in their biggest stars - MS Dhoni and Suresh Raina. By teasing its fans with glimpses and pictures of the duo together they reiterated that their friendship and "bromance" is a solid part of what is dear to the franchise. It is especially smart to do so as Suresh Raina did not participate in the previous edition of the tournament and there were reports doing the rounds that there was a rift between him and primarily stakeholder N Srinivasan.

The official twitter handle @ChennaiIPL tweeted 'Mustafa Mustafa', a hit Tamil song by A.R. Rahman in one of their tweets along with the words 'Thala' and 'Chinna Thala' for Dhoni and Raina respectively. This song is an iconic friendship song and drives home the point about their camaraderie while scoring bonus points for being a song that is loved within the Tamizh culture and the home market. It's now well established that CSK popularised the use of 'Thala' for Dhoni years ago but what also interestingly latched on was the use of 'Chinna Thala' for Suresh Raina which informally translates to a deputy leader or the right hand of the captain. The official twitter handle refers to him with that term at least thrice in the five times he features in the sample size. Whether it was the 'Mustafa Mustafa' tweet with Dhoni, or one praising his effort against Sunrisers Hyderabad, or a flashback with a throwback picture from 2014 wherein he scored a match-winning 87 off 25 against Kings XI Punjab, CSK makes sure to repeat these words for the purpose of drillability.

The franchise believes in staying true to its roots and constantly uses words and lingo specific to the Tamizh culture and caters well to its local market. An interesting example is the use of "Aaramikalangala" when they revealed Dhoni in the official team-kit on social media, just hours before their inaugural match of the season. Aaramikalangala roughly translates to "Let's begin."



Similarly, the franchise often makes use of local lingo to cater to their most loyal and highly identified fans within the region. For example, "Whistles Parakatuum" meaning, 'Let the whistles fly!' relates to their team anthem and slogan Whistlepodu. In one of the tweets in the sample size, it refers to Ambati Rayudu as "Vaathi" which stands for Vaathiyar, meaning a teacher to the masses and the epitome of the ideal man. South Indian superstar MGR is fondly referred to as Vaathiyar as well.



They also use local words when they want to make use of adjectives or pronouns and collective nouns. For instance, they used the "Vallimaiyana", meaning 'strong' to describe the cameos of MS Dhoni and Moeen Ali against Kolkata Knight Riders. Or, the use of "Magizhchi" which translates to 'happiness', by the franchise along with a smiling picture of Dhoni in a tweet during the off-season.

As the second wave of Covid-19 engulfed India, almost all franchises went out of their way to spread awareness and fulfil their corporate social responsibility

through donations of oxygen cylinders, ventilators and financial aid. It also promotes goodwill and increases brand equity when teams indulge in social campaigns. Even for that purpose, the CSK twitter handle made sure it showed its dedication to its home market. During Week 5, the handle's most retweeted tweets were dedicated to "Namma Tamizhagam" and "Namma Tamil Nadu." Here, Namma means 'ours' while Tamizhagam translates to the geographical region inhabited by ancient Tamil people.

Interestingly, the sense of regionalism is so strong among Mumbaikars there is a very popular twitter handle by the name @NorthStandGang, a fan collective named after one of the most popular stands in the Wankhede Stadium, where they get the best view of the game. However, their use of Mumbai-specific elements is very smart and subtle. For example, their handle itself is called @mipaltan, wherein 'paltan' in the local lingo means 'troop' or 'team'. In 11 out of 18 most retweeted tweets of the franchise during the observation period, the fans see local boy Rohit Sharma features in the content even if it isn't specifically about something he said. In doing so, the franchise reaffirms that while the team has a largely Indian core comprising of Jasprit Bumrah, Hardik Pandya, Krunal Pandya and Suryakumar Yadav with a lot of support from a senior Caribbean player like Kieron Pollard, the main man for them is their Mumbaikar skipper, Rohit Sharma. There are only two tweets in the sample size that mention anything region-specific.

Firstly, there is the mention of आमची मुंबई (Aamchi Mumbai) in a fan photograph that clicks a beautiful scenery of birds flocked in the shape of a heart with the background of the World Sea Link in Mumbai. (See Fig. 4.13)



Secondly, the mention of the popular North Stand in the iconic Wankhede stadium in the tweet as seen in Fig. 4.6. "...Tare sprinted towards the North Stand & the Wankhede went bonkers!" As is obvious, a lot of their branding and messaging regarding the team is centred around regionalism but its most retweeted tweet gives the impression that they do not want to make the team a space exclusive to its home-market or localities, much like the opinion about the city of Mumbai itself, wherein everyone is welcome.

In the case of RCB, there remains a general opinion on Twitter that the team erred in branding when it did not make their Karnataka roots a more focal point in their strategies. They are faced with this problem not just on social media as is obvious through their singular tweet in the sample size that can be attributed to being region-specific but also in scouting talent that is not from the state, or not retaining local players or giving them enough opportunities in the Playing XI or the criticism around the team anthem. It has not affected their support as a team, in attendance or loyalty probably because it can be attributed to the fan-following of their two icon players – Kohli and deVilliers as well as the fact that the local Bengaluru or Karnataka audience are bound to be driven by regionalism even if the team doesn't highlight or exemplify its culture or any local elements as much.

They now have a chance to change that with the rise of Devdutt Paddikkal, a young player from Karnataka that is performing well for the franchise if they do decide to retain him in the coming years. However, because he is only two seasons old in the league, it is hard to leverage his presence. It is important to note that the franchise has valued its home ground, the M Chinnaswamy Stadium under branding. It is responsible for creating a lot of high-scoring and memorable games that starred some of the team's stars but that too hasn't found any footing on social media because the pandemic did not allow for any matches to be played there in the last two seasons. This is one team that can consider maximizing local elements and motifs for the purpose of glocalization.

The key informant interview with Mr. Gurkirat Singh Gill (personal communication, interview conducted on Twitter dated 27th March, 2021), who was associated with the agency entrusted with the task of rebranding Delhi Capital's social media strategy, gave an insight into how these franchises think.

According to him, JSW figured out that the Delhi-based franchise lacked a 'local connect' which teams like Chennai Super Kings, Mumbai Indians, Royal Challengers Bangalore, Kolkata Knight Riders and Sunrisers Hyderabad had. Often, CSK and MI had more support in Delhi's home ground, Feroz Shah Kotla Stadium than the local team itself. He also mentioned Delhi's multicultural nature. To avoid homogenization and standardization in any multicultural society, narrowing down on motifs and elements in branding strategies that do not promote generalization is imperative. According to Census 2011, Delhi has the highest share of inter-state migrants in its total population among all states (Hindustan Times, 2019). According to him, the team should always try and connect with the city and its culture rather than an individual(s). He adds -

"Individuals will come and go but the feeling around the culture and city is relatively permanent. Eventually, fans make the brand bigger. Not the players."

4.2 Team Identification: Team Allegiance and Fanatical Fans

For some franchises, segments of the fan-base can have high to very high levels of loyalty. For example, Royal Challengers Bangalore have lost all finals they have featured in but they continue to remain popular on social media. Chennai Super Kings faced a two-year suspension in 2015 after a match-fixing scandal, however, they were able to recover in terms of impact, growth and popularity in the league almost immediately in their comeback season. Based on the observation during my netnography, it is safe to say that these two franchises comprise the most passionate and fierce fans that are willing to defend the franchise, its performance and the actions of its star players. This loyalty can be attributed to multiple factors such as allegiance towards their marquee players AB de Villiers and Virat Kohli in the case of RCB and MS Dhoni and Suresh Raina in the case of CSK, the location and market size of the respective franchises, their brand deals and pure nostalgia. Individuals who belong to the extreme end of the spectrum as defined by Ennis (2019) are referred to as "fanatical fans" and make a large part of the fan-base in the case of RCB and CSK. During humiliating losses, team strategy blunders, bad investment in players, or failure to correct mistakes in the auction, the fan-base comes to their defense. Both of these franchises consist of a large chunk of fanatical and highly loyal fans and are able to retain their continued loyalty. It explains why they boast of a huge social media presence.

Mumbai Indians' case is not as complex as these two. They are the most successful team in the tournament with five trophies under their belt and are automatically the team to beat in each edition. Moreover, they are based out of Mumbai, a location that boasts of a strong sense of regionalism, and a huge market size. It is led by Rohit Sharma – a Mumbaikar, which further strengthens their dominance in the league. It is also praised for its support staff and management and a solid and consistent core set of players, most of which belong to India along with a very robust scouting program – team relationship. As mentioned earlier, Chennai Super Kings had to face a rough patch after the match-fixing allegations and the two-year suspension and Royal Challengers Bangalore continue to struggle in the search for a trophy and the brutal trolling on Twitter because of their past, but this willingness to remain loyal in this fan-team relationship.

According to the observations in this study, CSK comprises of a large chunk of highly identified fans because not only is their branding and team-building strategy in congruence with their vision but also because they have successfully used elements of glocalisation to further the opinion about the team. They have also been able to leverage the demi-god status of MS Dhoni to their advantage while treating its other core players such as Raina, Ravindra Jadeja, Faf du Plessis and Dwayne Bravo as the vital cogs in the wheel. The fanbase seems to rally around each other to defend any mistakes by its players, especially Dhoni and show that they feel a sense of belongingness that goes beyond aesthetic, entertainment or sensory stimulation purposes. It is reflected well in their social media. It can also be said that the legacy of the team is such that even if 'Thala' decides to stop playing the IPL, the highly identified fans are likely to stay long after he is gone.

Similarly, in the case of Mumbai Indians, it can be safely said that a large part of their highly identified fans' personal motives is fulfilled. Their branding is successful as it has been consistent. They do not seem to be posting out of the box content to attract more fans but it can be said that MI is looking to attract its play-

ers and increase their sense of identification and allegiance towards the team largely through its performances. While CSK has ensured that they use social media creatively with the aim to keep their fanbase satisfied. MI seems to place that responsibility primarily on team success and performance. If cricket viewers who are on the first or second stage of the Psychological Continuum Model (2001) (Refer to Fig. 3.2) namely awareness and attraction were to move towards full-fledged allegiance, that would be because of the rewarding experience this team provides on-field. It can be inferred so because it fulfills one of the very important motives for a fan – increased self-esteem. Royal Challengers Bangalore, however, seem to look at it differently. So far, they have devised a strategy for Twitter that is safe enough to keep the current fans engaged and invested. However, as is obvious, a large chunk of their highly identified fans are highly identified fans of the players themselves. In a case like this, a lot of the loyalty towards the team is dependent on the presence of these players. Because they also don't have a title victory like the other two franchises to make nostalgia the driving factor behind their legacy, they are faced with the task of branding the team in a way that makes fans willing to stay in that relationship after Kohli and de Villiers stop playing the league. In a nutshell, the franchise is depending on these two players not just to pull things off on the field but also off-the-field. In business analogy, this is similar to a brand expecting its ambassador or mascot to carry a product that may not fulfill the consumers' primary expectations.

CONCLUSION:

After the analysis of the research, it was found that apart from glocalisation and team identification, several evident strategies for building brand loyalty included the tendency to enhance the fans' relationship with an athlete via identification with an athlete. Apart from that, highlighting the awards and achievements of the past is another strategy teams employ to build and eventually boost loyalty. When it came to the main themes of the study - namely glocalisation and team identification, qualitative methods such as netnography and discourse analysis gave an insight into how the most followed IPL franchises on Twitter position themselves. These insights were substantiated by incorporating a key informant interview as it gave the research a voice beyond that of the researcher. Glocalisation among franchises takes the form of motifs and symbols inspired by regionalism along with the local lingo to cater to highly identified fans that began supporting the team to get a touch of the local flavours. The slogan of the Indian Premier League itself incorporates elements of glocalisation by marketing itself as "India ka tyohaar" or 'India's festival.' This event may be packaged for a near-global audience, with an intention to spread the game beyond the subcontinent and make use of this globalised cricket market but it holds its Indian roots very dear as is reflected in their use of Indian motifs in every step of the way. Several white-skinned cheerleaders are hired by the franchise but they are often seen with local elements like bindis and tikaas.

It is only natural that the franchises in the tournament work along similar lines. Among the three teams, glocalisation was strongest and most overt in the social media messaging of Chennai Super Kings. It makes use of the Tamizh culture, shows that it is extremely proud of its local roots and welcomes even its North Indian stars like their own. They give the players' names like Thala, Chinna Thala, Vaathi, etc. that resonate with their own culture and the athletes oblige its local fanbase not just through performance but by adopting the culture, performing local dances on local tunes in their team anthem, advertisements, brand deals or during promotional events and learning the basics of the language and using them on their own social media. While the feeling of regionalism among Mumbaikars is well established in social and political discourse in India, it can be safely said that they are far more subtle when it comes to social media as their most retweeted tweets only have minimal elements that can be associated with a culture specific to Mumbai and Maharashtra. Although Mumbai, like Delhi, sees major immigration, its culture has still been preserved and it does not face the same problem that other multicultural cities do. It looks like Mumbai Indians, however, chooses to make a conscious effort as to not alienate fans that are not supporting the team because of its geographical location but because of its players, performance or team strategies. Royal Challengers Bangalore, on the other hand, seems to have a unique problem. While it boasts of a massive following despite having no title victory like Mumbai Indians and Chennai Super Kings, it must incorporate the opinions of the multiple voices within their fanbase. Some of their most loyal fans are because of the region and some are fans of its star players. It is obvious through the conversations on Twitter that they have struggled to satisfy their Kannada-speaking fans and the fans that want to support a franchise that is based out of Bengaluru in terms of its positioning. While it is a good idea to base a lot of its messaging on the success and popularity of the athletes that play for the franchise, it can result in problems like that of RCB's fanbase. It cannot be the primary strategy that drives the communication on social media. It can definitely make use of more glocal elements to boost their loyalty and reward its fans who are willing to stay in the fan-team relationship despite the lack of titles.

As for team identification, it is easy to conclude after observing Cricket Twitter that the value of a highly identified fan of a team like RCB is just as much as that of a team like CSK and MI, or any team that has a title victory in the last fourteen editions. I conclude so because it is easier to identify with a team and pledge whole-hearted allegiance if the fan-team relationship is highly rewarding in terms of success and performance as is for CSK and MI but highly identified fans of teams like RCB, Delhi Capitals or even Kings XI Punjab that have not had as rewarding fan-team relationships but still show continued loyalty. Of course, the

loyalty of fans across teams remains fungible in franchise sport but this continued relationship is an indicator of high allegiance. However, it is not viable for a long-term approach from the team's point of view. RCB may be able to build itself around its star players, Virat Kohli, AB de Villiers, Chris Gayle earlier and Glenn Maxwell in 2021, but what about the team's approach for when their star attraction ceases to be the motive behind why people decide to support a team? For instance, a team like CSK that has built and marketed itself as a team whose heart is MS Dhoni does not face the same problem even if its star attraction is no longer the driving factor behind the team. It can boast of a legacy beyond that. The same is the case with MI who will perpetually be seen as a strong team because of its past success as one of the motives behind why a fan decides to pledge allegiance towards it. For such a team, the privilege to become complacent on social media or not heavily design communication based on glocalization or its star players exists. Thus, it can be concluded that the hypothesis that identifying with a specific region or its culture and player(s) is increasingly becoming the social media strategy adopted by IPL franchises to establish effective brand loyalty is in fact, true.

However, this study brought out several nuances within the complex industry that is now dominated by cricket in India. For any brand or company that sees itself as a business with potential, there is intensive market research analysis and research on consumer culture. If the Indian Premier League can itself be categorized as a brand or business in its own right, it brings about the realisation and scope for more research. A globalized event like the Indian Premier League demands more interest and resources be put in for the purpose of research from a non-business or market-oriented point of view. Instead, focusing on the psychology of marketers, athletes and fans through a social lens can definitely promote the expansion of the global cricket empire. It has been fourteen years since the league was first staged and the appetite for it has only increased. There is more scope for its development, expansion and impact and further research will only increase the engagement and investment from all across the globe.

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